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Mrs Fiona Dall  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mrs Dall

### **Short inspection of Mulberry Bush School**

Following my visit to the school on 16 January 2018 with Hilary Goddard, Ofsted Inspector, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. The visit was the first short inspection carried out since the school was judged to be outstanding in November 2012.

#### **This school continues to be outstanding.**

The leadership team has maintained the outstanding quality of education at the school since the last school inspection. You have resolutely ensured that the school continues to evolve and improve. Staff collaborate supremely well with each other and with external agencies to provide carefully considered support and extensive nurturing for each pupil. They use their deep understanding of therapies exceptionally well to ensure that additional provision meets pupils' individual needs. Of note, is the way agreed approaches are consistently implemented across both the school and residential settings. During my visit, it was evident that high levels of consistency assist pupils in making the transition between home and school. You have developed a culture in which staff carefully reflect on all aspects of the care and support they provide. Any changes made arising from their reflections are swiftly implemented and beneficial to pupils. As a result, while in your care, pupils make momentous strides in their learning, confidence and self-esteem.

You have systematically developed the skills and expertise of subject leaders. As a consequence, new approaches to teaching have been successfully introduced. For example, you have developed the way phonics is taught. In mathematics, pupils now use specialist equipment to enhance their understanding of number. Work in pupils' books shows what a positive effect these approaches are having on developing pupils' knowledge, skills and understanding. The new approach to assessing pupils' progress is now properly embedded across the school and assists teachers in sharing with pupils what they need to do in order to improve their work.

Teachers also make very good use of information from their assessments to write personalised learning plans. In so doing, the recommendation from the previous school inspection report has been fully implemented. However, you rightly acknowledge that some new approaches are more developed than others. You have accurately identified that new approaches to teaching writing need further refinement.

Trustees work closely with leaders to ensure that pupils' experiences across the board are top-notch and new approaches are having the anticipated impact. In particular, trustees work closely with the headteacher to ensure that teaching is as strong as it can be. They ask challenging questions about the progress pupils make and the impact that any additional funding is having. Trustees know the school, its staff and its pupils very well from their regular visits to see the school at work. However, they are not complacent and constantly strive to make the school even better.

The key therapeutic approaches you adopt are woven through every aspect of the school, including the curriculum. You rightly insist that all staff who work with pupils undertake training in these approaches. To this end, you have developed a bespoke level 5 training qualification, which you helpfully deliver on-site. You also ensure that staff work exceptionally well with colleagues from external agencies. As a consequence of the above, staff who work with pupils have high levels of professional expertise, which they employ to the benefit of the pupils. Your staff are also acutely aware of the impact they have on pupils. Nothing is left to chance. Every aspect of each pupils' care is planned in minute detail. Consequently, pupils whose experiences have been negative in other educational institutions, including special schools, often have very positive experiences at your school.

### **Safeguarding is effective.**

Safeguarding procedures and processes are fit for purpose and work very well. You have fully taken on board the recommendations from the previous social care report. For instance, when completing online records following incidents of physical intervention, staff must indicate that they have carried out all the necessary checks. You are wisely tightening other systems so they are even more stringent. For example, over the next couple of weeks you will be introducing a new electronic sign-in system for pupils. You have also developed strong working relationships with a number of different local authorities' safeguarding teams. Where necessary, you have had challenging conversations with welfare officers from some partner local authorities to ensure that your pupils are given the provision they need.

Safeguarding within the school is rightly focused on developing pupils' understanding of how to conduct safe relationships. Social and emotional learning is sensibly prioritised within the school curriculum. Pupils' development in different aspects of social and emotional learning is carefully tracked. In addition, designated safeguarding leaders work closely with each pupil's 'treatment team' to plan and deliver bespoke guidance and support. Where necessary, this support will include reflective, one-to-one work with trained therapists. The school has strong evidence

which shows that its work to help pupils make sense of their own complex and often traumatic life stories is having a positive impact.

## **Inspection findings**

- During the inspection, inspectors explored the impact of the curriculum on pupils' progress and well-being. They also looked at how well new approaches to teaching were working. Other areas reviewed by inspectors were the impact of the school's partnership work, the accuracy of trustees' and leaders' evaluations and the safeguarding culture in the school.
- The trustees have relevant and extensive experience which they bring to bear when evaluating the impact of the school's work. The detailed feedback provided following trustees' visits is particularly noteworthy. Leaders use this feedback alongside feedback from external partners to build an accurate picture of the school's strengths and areas for further development.
- The school has benefited from the outreach work that it has undertaken in its role as a teaching school and lead school in the local network of special schools. The school has sensibly established a mechanism through which effective safeguarding practice can be shared with its partners. Responsible leaders say that although this initiative is in its early days it has enabled them to enhance some aspects of their practice.
- Staff are keenly attuned to the fact that pupils have different capabilities in terms of regulating their own behaviour, working independently and cooperating with others. Pupils are placed in stages according to their aptitudes. Pupils' awareness of the progress they make in developing key learning skills is impressive. Teachers and assistants help pupils to keep tabs on their progress effectively by frequently referring to pupils' individual 'behaviour wheels'. These are displayed in each classroom and visually represent each pupil's progress in acquiring these crucial skills.
- The new approach to assessment you have introduced supports teachers very well in checking that the work they set builds on pupils' prior learning and knowledge. Across a wide range of curriculum subjects pupils gain new skills and knowledge. Each pupil has a copy of the bespoke learning the teacher has planned for them to undertake during the session, including any extension tasks. As a result, pupils are clear about what they need to do, the order in which they need to do it and what they are learning. The plan also helps assistants to support pupils very effectively. For example, it helps assistants to ask questions which assist pupils in figuring out their next steps for themselves.
- In your role as headteacher you have worked in tandem with the executive headteacher to develop senior and middle leaders. Together you provide the right balance of support and challenge. You have high standards, which you sensibly model when carrying out checks on teaching. You have tight systems so that any aspects of practice identified as in need of finesse are picked up in the one-to-one supervisions which senior leaders hold with teaching staff.
- You have successfully implemented a new system for setting targets and tracking the progress pupils make. You have refined and customised a commercial system

so that it better suits your needs. The targets you set as to the progress you expect each pupil to make are challenging. Most pupils meet these targets but pupils' progress in writing is not quite as impressive as it is in mathematics and reading.

- Pupils' workbooks indicate that over time their mathematical skills improve very well. Pupils can apply appropriate methods of calculation with increasing confidence. Pupils' writing also develops over time and many move from having their writing scribed by an assistant to writing for themselves. Sometimes pupils are asked to write in forms that are too complex given their capabilities and this limits the flow of their writing. Some pupils are not clear enough about which words can and which cannot be spelt phonetically. You have wisely identified some aspects of the teaching of writing as an improvement priority.
- Staff constantly reassess what is working for the pupils and what needs refining. This is part and parcel of their day-to-day practice and has a positive impact on pupils' daily experience of school. There is a very strong focus on assisting pupils so they are able to manage transitions very well. For example, staff swiftly identified that the start of the day on Tuesday was not as strong as other days and have found imaginative ways to improve this.
- Pupils who spoke to me could clearly identify how the school had helped them, one saying it helped her to feel less 'nerve-racked'. Another pupil commented that the school had taught him how to manage his emotions when with his family.

### **Next steps for the school**

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- they fully implement and monitor planned new approaches to writing so pupils are able to write with greater confidence and enjoyment.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the trustees and the chief executive officer of The Mulberry Bush organisation, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Oxfordshire. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Sarah Hubbard  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

### **Information about the inspection**

During the inspection, inspectors checked safeguarding arrangements, including the records of recruitment checks, policies and procedures. They reviewed a range of information, including the school's self-evaluation, internal and external review

documents, information about pupils' progress and the results from pupil and staff surveys conducted by the school. Inspectors observed learning, accompanied by either the headteacher or deputy headteacher on six separate occasions. They observed pupils during breaktime and also met with a group of pupils. Inspectors met with senior leaders on two occasions. They also separately met with leaders responsible for safeguarding, a group of middle leaders, the family network practitioner and the senior member of staff responsible for outreach work. Meetings were held with the executive headteacher and the headteacher, together and separately. A telephone call was made to the vice-chair of trustees, who works closely with the headteacher. Inspectors undertook a scrutiny of pupils' work. They took into account the two responses to the Parent View survey and the two comments made on free text.